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Anabaptist Spirituality and the Heidelberg Catechism

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Anabaptist Spirituality and the Heidelberg Catechism

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Although the Anabaptists are not explicitly mentioned in the Heidelberg Catechism, it is generally acknowledged that the catechism is not only influenced by the debates with Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism, but also with the representatives of the so-called radical reformation.¹ The catechism seems to express a comparatively mild attitude towards the Anabaptists. Whereas it calls the mass a condemnable idolatry (HC 80) and the invocation of the saints a denial of Christ the only Savior (HC 30), it counters Anabaptist errors with exclusively positive statements: “Are infants also to be baptized? Yes: for they are included in the covenant and church of God” (HC 74) and “May we swear an oath in God’s name if we do it reverently? Yes, when the government demands it, or when necessity requires it” (HC 101).²

It is self-evident that these two questions and answers aim at Anabaptist convictions, but it is probable that there are also other anti-Anabaptist elements in the text.³ Frederick III had to defend himself against suspicions not only of being too lax against the Anabaptists, but even of sympathizing with them.⁴ To find other possible hints at the positions of the Anabaptists in the catechism one has to turn either to related writings or to the immediate historical context. This paper assesses Zacharias Ursinus’ *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* and the report of the 1571 Frankenthal disputation in order to get a clearer picture of what Lyle Bierma calls “the unnamed target of the HC” (2005, 79). It closes with some conclusions regarding the interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism from the perspective of the debate with the Anabaptists and considers the implications of the findings for the spirituality of the catechism.

¹ There is hardly any secondary literature on the relationship between the Anabaptists and the Heidelberg Catechism. The *Handbook on the Heidelberg Catechism* only mentions the radicals Caspar Schwenckfeld and Michael Servet. Huijgen (2013), 214, 231.

² For the English translations of the HC cf. CRC: 1979.

³ For a discussion of the Anabaptist convictions on the magistrate and the oath related to the catechism, see Van den Belt: 2014.

⁴ In 1564 Frederik wrote to John William, duke of Saxe-Weimar (1530-1573), that the baptism of children in the Palatinate was not postponed until they had reached the years of discernment and in 1567 to Christoph, Duke of Württemberg (1515-1568) that Anabaptists were admonished and if they were not teachable they would be expelled from the country. (Krebs: 1971, 161, cf. Bouma: 1992, 141vv).

Ursinus' *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*

The textual history of Zacharias Ursinus' *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* is rather complicated. The book is based on Ursinus' academic lectures on the catechism, but there are several versions of the lecture lecture-notes and the printed editions also differ. It would be wrong to read the *Commentary* as the decisive explanation of the *Heidelberg Catechism* as originally intended, because it also resembles the developing opinion of Ursinus and even might mirror the opinion of the editors in debates after his death (Voorwinden/Van den Belt: 2013).

Nevertheless the *Commentary* is fit for tracing those parts of the catechism in which the debate with the Anabaptists probably plays a role. Where Ursinus mentions them, it is likely the debate with the Anabaptists was already of importance when he wrote the catechism. For a detailed study of Ursinus' opinion on the Anabaptists the different Latin editions should be compared, but for the sake of listing the possible points of influence, use of the final edition by his David Pareus (1548-1622) suffices.⁵

In the *Commentary* the Anabaptists are sometimes only mentioned in a list together with others; "Arians, Papists, Anabaptists, and all other heretics" are said to "add their errors to the little that they have copied from the apostolic doctrine" (Ursinus: 1888, 4). Most interesting for now are those places where they are explicitly mentioned other than in the contexts of baptism (367), and the oath (551).⁶

Three different fields of topics, arise from the *Commentary*. In the first place, the Anabaptists are mentioned in the context of the doctrine of sin. According to Ursinus, they teach that sin is only a matter of imitation and not of propagation and therefore oppose the teaching that the holiness and good works of the righteous are imperfect (65). Ursinus refers to Calvin who writes in the *Institutes* that the restoration of the believer "is not accomplished in a single moment, or day, or year; but by continual, and sometimes even slow advances, the

⁵ This paper follows the nineteenth century English translation Ursinus 1888. The translator George W. Williard used a Latin edition edited by David Pareus (Geneva, 1616) and a 1585-copy that he does not specify and had only seen after he had already translated a substantial part of the 1616-edition. He compared this with a copy of the English edition of Henry Parry that contained some material not found in the two Latin copies.

⁶ Sometimes their rejection of paedobaptism is mentioned in passing, as for instance in the discussion of ecclesiology: "Infants born in the church are also of the church, notwithstanding all the cant of the Anabaptists to the contrary." (293)

Lord destroys the carnal corruptions of his chosen, purifies them from all pollution, and consecrates them as temples to himself” (475).⁷

Apparently the Reformed and Anabaptists differed on sin and sanctification. This possibly influenced some of the questions and answers. The phrase of the catechism the fall of Adam and Eve “has so poisoned our nature that we are all conceived and born in a sinful condition” (*HC* 7) might be too general to be interpreted as explicitly anti-Anabaptist, but in his explanation Ursinus claims that they believe and teach that there is no original sin, just as the Pelagians formerly did (39).

The phrasing of the catechism that “those converted to God cannot obey the commandments perfectly” and that “in this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience” (*HC* 114) might also have been inspired by Anabaptist perfectionism. In his *Commentary* Ursinus does not mention the Anabaptists, but speaks in general of “our opponents” and “our adversaries” (610, 611). In his comments on original sin (*HC* 7), however, he says that considering the origin of sin in the world and in ourselves, is not only beneficial for “constant humiliation and penitence”, but also that we may turn away from “the errors and corruptions of the Anabaptists and Libertines, who deny that they have any sin” (37). There the *Commentary* states there that the objections of the Anabaptists against the ‘imperfection of the holiness and good works of the righteous’ will be dealt with in the exposition of *HC* 114 (65).⁸

Secondly, Ursinus mentions the Anabaptists in relation to the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul, because of the idea of the soul-sleep. “It is argued by some Anabaptists that the soul after it is separated from the body, lies dormant until the future resurrection, when it will again be reunited to the body.” (309-310)

According to Ursinus, the Anabaptists also deny the continuity of the resurrection body with the present body, but believed in a *nova creatio* at the second coming of Christ (313). He does not explain how these two positions are interconnected nor if different groups of Anabaptists held these views. He claims that the Anabaptists “deny that the very same bodies which we now have will rise again, and contend that God will create new bodies at the second coming of Christ” (313). According to Ursinus, the bodies in the resurrection, will not only be human, but “the very same which we now have, and not other and different bodies created by Christ, as the Anabaptists affirm” (315).

⁷ The reference is to Calvin, *Institutes* 3.3.9.

⁸ It is likely that this reference is from the editor Pareus, because he also refers to the *Opera* of Ursinus.

The Anabaptists refer to 1 Corinthians 15 where the apostle Paul says that flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom of God. The *Commentary* phrases this objection as a syllogism: “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. These bodies of ours consist of flesh and blood. Therefore they cannot inherit the kingdom of God; consequently not these, but other bodies shall rise in the resurrection.” (315). Ursinus makes a ‘scholastic’ distinction between flesh and blood as evil quality of the substance of the body and flesh and blood as the substance itself. “They jump from the fact that mortal and corrupt flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God to the conclusion that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God at all” (315).

It is in accordance with this discussion, that the text of the *Heidelberg Catechism* emphasizes both that the soul of the believers will be in heaven and that their very flesh will rise again: “Not only will my soul be taken immediately after this life to Christ its head, but also my very flesh will be raised by the power of Christ, reunited with my soul, and made like Christ’s glorious body.” (HC 57)

Finally, Ursinus also mentions the Anabaptists in the context of the fourth commandment, because they object to the observance of the first day of the week, seeing that the New Testament forbids any distinction between days. “Therefore, say they, the observance of the first day is as much condemned as that of the seventh” (565). Ursinus answers that the Scriptures only forbids Christians to make a distinction between days when they would intend reestablishing ceremonial worship.

It is not sure if the phrasing of the catechism is influenced by this controversy, but possibly the facts that the Sunday is called a “festive day of rest” and that the life of sanctification is called the beginning the “eternal Sabbath” (HC 103) may have partly been intended to counter criticism from this side.

Thus at the background of the catechism’s statements on original sin or the remaining power of sin, the resurrection of the body, and the fourth commandment (HC 7, 8, 57, 103, and 114) the Anabaptists might have been in mind, though it is sometimes difficult to prove if and how the phrasing of the *Heidelberg Catechism* was influenced. In different ways these topics relate to spirituality, either regarding the correct Christian view of the power of sin, or of the body as a temple of the Spirit or more generally of the life of sanctification.

In the mean time, the Anabaptists are not treated mildly in Ursinus lectures. Sometimes they are even demonized; the denial of infant baptism “and similar follies of the sect of the Anabaptists should be carefully avoided, since they have, without doubt, been hatched by the devil, and are detestable heresies which they have fabricated from various

errors and blasphemies” (368).⁹ Further research would be necessary to find out if there is a stronger opposition in the development of reformed theology as it appears in the lectures of Ursinus and in the subsequent additions of these lectures on his students like David Pareus.

The Frankenthal Disputation of 1571

Our second source is the Frankenthal disputation of 1571.¹⁰ Eight years after the publication of the *Heidelberg Catechism* Friedrich III invited Anabaptists from the Palatinate and from abroad for a theological discussion. Their safety was guaranteed for fourteen days before and after the debate, although some of Frederick’s political advisors, like Thomas Erastus (1524–1583) advocated a more rigorous attitude (Krebs: 1971, 196, cf. Bouma: 1992, 151). The disputation took place every day except Sunday from May the 28th to June the 19th; and the first session began at six in the morning. The representatives from Anabaptist side were so-called “Swiss Brethren” from the Palatinate and from abroad. There were no Hutterites from Moravia and no Mennonites from the Low Countries, to the disappointment of the elector and the Reformed pastors.¹¹ Peter Dathenus, court chaplain at Heidelberg, led the discussion from the Reformed side assisted by six other pastors.¹²

Ultimately the disputation was also of importance for the development of the Anabaptist theology in the circle of the Swiss Brethren. As Snyder demonstrates, the protocol of the Frankenthal Disputation served as a starting point for further reflection (1999, 2000). Roth suggests that the safe haven of Frankenthal and other places where similar disputations were held enabled the lay theologians to develop their theological identity (2007, 355).

The record of the disputation, the so-called *Protocol* of 806 printed pages served to prove that the Anabaptists were wrong, but recorded the debate accurately (Yoder: 1962a, 34); it was immediately translated into Dutch. The mandate of the elector, who was only present at the opening session, lists the topics the Reformed thought they disagreed on with the Anabaptists:

⁹ According to Gary K. Waite the Reformed, compared to Catholic and Lutheran intolerance, only rarely depicted the Anabaptists as demonic but generally used biblical and rational arguments against them (2007, 60-61). This seemingly mild attitude, however, may be more strategic than out of principle. In the Reformed sources the Anabaptists are also demonized quite often.

¹⁰ On the disputation see Hege: 1908, 112-135, Güss: 1960, 73vv., and Bouma: 1992, 148-155,.

¹¹ “Swiss Brethren” is a collective name for German-speaking Anabaptists who did not belong to the Hutterites or the Mennonites and were located in Switzerland and South and Middle Germany and not an exclusively geographical designation (Bender: 1959).

¹² According to Yoder, Dathenus was a skillful debater and expert in Anabaptist issues with which he was familiar from Anabaptist materials collected in Holland (1962a, 27). Yoder refers to Güss: 1960, 77.

1. Concerning Holy Scripture: Whether the Scriptures of the Old Testament have as much authority for the Christian as those of the New Testament. That is: whether the doctrine of the main articles of Christian faith and life can and must be proved from the Old Testament as well as from the new.
2. Concerning God: Whether the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are a single divine being, though distinguished in three persons.
3. Concerning Christ: Whether Christ has taken the essence of his flesh from the substance of the flesh of the Virgin Mary or from somewhere else.
4. Concerning original sin: Whether the children are conceived and born in original sin and therefore by nature children of wrath and guilty of eternal death.
5. Concerning the church: Whether the believers in the Old Testament are one congregation and people of God with the believers in the New Testament.
6. Concerning justification: Whether the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ accepted by true faith is the only and exclusively sufficient atonement for our sins and cause of our eternal salvation. Or otherwise whether we are saved partly by faith in Christ out of grace and partly by the cross and good works.
7. Concerning the resurrection of the flesh: Whether the essence of this flesh will rise again on the last day or whether any other one will be created by God.
8. Concerning marriage: Whether excommunication and unbelief dissolve a marriage.
9. Concerning the communion of goods: Whether the Christian is allowed to buy and have his own property without violating Christian charity.
10. Concerning the magistrate: Whether a Christian can be a magistrate and is allowed to punish the wicked with the sword.
11. Concerning the oath: Whether the Christian is allowed to swear lawfully by the name of God; that is call upon God as a witness of the truth.
12. Concerning baptism: Whether the children of Christians should be baptized.
13. Concerning the Lord's Supper: Whether the holy supper is only a mere and empty sign and exhortation to patience and love, or whether it is also the powerful seal of the blessed communion that all believers have with Christ unto eternal life (cf. Yoder: 1962a, 22).

The only issue on which the parties agreed according to the *recapitulatio* was justification (770). Divorce after excommunication was particular for the Dutch Mennonites. One of the

spokesmen of the Palatinate Anabaptists, Rauff Bisch of Odernheim,¹³ distanced himself from Menno Simons and stated that nothing could be a reason for divorce except adultery (603). The communion of goods characterized the Hutterites, who were also absent.¹⁴ Rauff Bisch claimed that a Christian may buy, sell and possess his own property. “However, everyone according to the teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 must [...] have it as though he had it not” (610). He refused to defend the Hutterite position (614, cf. Stayer: 1994, 161). Although it is clear that the Reformed saw possible Anabaptist errors on these points, it does not seem likely that the *Heidelberg Catechism*’s explanation of the communion of saints or of the seventh commandment were composed with these errors in mind, although for instance the explanation of the communion of saints as sharing in the gifts of Christ and sharing one’s own gifts with other Christians (*HC* 55) might be read as an implicit rejection of literal communion of goods.

Two of the three issues discussed above from Ursinus’ *Commentary* also appear in the Frankenthal list: original sin and the resurrection of the body. In *Protocol* the Anabaptists are condemned for holding that

the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David, and all the faithful, were conceived and born in sin. After Christ has fulfilled the obedience of the death on the cross, however, he has redeemed them from this heritage and from all other sins, thus abolishing Adam’s sin. So he has placed the human race in the liberty again, that no human being is conceived and born in sin any more. (772)

The *Protocol* does not deal explicitly with perfectionism, but Dathenus does refer to Romans 7:14 in the discussion of original sin and argues that Paul “does not say I was carnal, but I am carnal” (260).¹⁵

On the resurrection of the body the recapitulation summarizes: “the dark way in which they speak about it, gives us a lot to think about” (774). It is hard to tell from the discussion

¹³ Rauff Bisch was the main spokesman from Anabaptist side, a few times Diebold Winter also played an important role (Yoder: 1961a, 26).

¹⁴ Dathenus concludes that no ‘Huterischen’ or ‘Merherländer’ – Anabaptists from Moravia – are present (609), but it is not clear whether Dathenus has one or two groups in mind. Older scholarship identified three of the participants as Hutterites and claimed that they decided to keep silent on these issues (Wolkan:1903, 51-52 and Hege: 1908, 115-117), but this is interpreted as a mistake by Friedmann: 1959. Krebs (1971, 182-183) follows the older view.

¹⁵ According to Beachy the way in which the sixth topic – on justification – is discussed illustrates the general suspicion that the Anabaptists were not orthodox on the doctrine of grace (1977, 9).

what the Anabaptists precisely believed, because they tried to stick as closely as possible to the literal texts of Paul, but it is clear that their Reformed opponents thought that they denied the continuity between the present and the resurrected body.

Four other fields of debate are interesting for the correct understanding the unnamed Anabaptist target of the Heidelberg Catechism. In the first place the doctrine of the Trinity was at stake. The Anabaptists in Frankenthal were hesitant to use the word ‘Person’, because they deemed it unbiblical. The *recapitulatio* claims that “it was made clear enough by our ministers, and [the Anabaptists] did not know a better word to explain the three hypostases (*selbstständigkeiten*) in the eternal divine essence” (771).

The Reformed concerns about Anabaptist errors might have influenced the way the Heidelberg Catechism speaks about the Trinity: “that is how God has revealed himself in his Word: these three distinct persons are one, true, eternal God” (HC 25). Of course, the phrasing is too general to be exclusively anti-Anabaptist, but the emphasis on God’s revelation in the Bible probably flows from the fact that many anti-trinitarian radicals appealed to Scripture to refute the doctrine of the Trinity.

In the second place, it is clear that the Anabaptists were blamed of holding an invalid view of Christ. The Anabaptist doctrine of the celestial flesh of Christ originated from the spiritualist Caspar Schwenckfeld (1489/90-1561) who influenced Melchior Hoffman (ca. 1500-1543) and through him Menno Simons (ca. 1496-1561). The issue was so important at Frankenthal that for this reason the Reformed claimed that the eternal wellbeing and salvation of the Anabaptists was at stake (12). Anabaptist pastors tell their flocks that they are ‘the only holy and elect people.’ (18) This, however, is a delusion.

Because even if you would lead a much holier life – as all God’s children are obliged to live holy according to the eternal will of God – and would exceed the angels in humility and spirituality – as Paul writes in Collossians 2 about some deceivers – that would all help you nothing, because you do not have the head, which is Jesus Christ, whom you do not know either in his natures or in his offices, as the reports of this disputation demonstrate.’ (18)

The statement in the *Heidelberg Catechism* that “the eternal Son of God [...] took to himself, through the working of the Holy Spirit, from the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary, a truly human nature so that he might also become David’s true descendant” (HC 35) is directed against this Anabaptist error.

It is surprising that Ursinus' *Commentary* does not mention the Anabaptists explicitly in this context, although he does claim that the exposition of the doctrine of Christ's two natures is "necessary on account of ancient and modern heretics, who have denied, and who now deny, that the flesh of Christ was taken from the substance of the Virgin" (205).¹⁶ This absence of an explicit reference to the Anabaptists shows that it would be a mistake to lean exclusively on the *Commentary* for the explanation of the catechism.

In the third place, the Reformed ecclesiological principle that Christ gathers, defends, and preserves his church from the beginning to the end of the world (*HC* 54) or rather the catholicity expressed in this answer, can be read as not only polemical against the Roman claim of exclusive catholicity, but also against the Anabaptists. As the introduction to the *Protocol* says: "God was never without a people or congregation from the very beginning and the eternal King Jesus Christ was not without a kingdom." ([19])¹⁷ The Anabaptist confession, however, only started in the year 1522, with Niclas Storch and Thomas M ntzer.

The Reformed copy the arguments the Roman Catholic polemicists used against them and the Lutherans, for instance referring to the disagreements among the Anabaptists: "The Mennonites baptize those who turn from your sect to them for a third time, as is publicly known, because those Mennonites do not recognize you as the congregation or Church of Christ any more than us, although you also rebaptize." ([20]) The Reformed see their own church as the catholic church. The Anabaptists wanted to return to the apostolic church, but the Reformed denied that you can really be apostolic, without being catholic, that is without continuity with the church of all ages.

The Anabaptists criticized the Reformed for the impurity of their churches, but according to the Reformed the impurity of the church is no reason for separation, because the church was already imperfect in the times of the prophets and apostles. They invite the Anabaptists to return to the true body of Christ "to help to repair and build the church of God" ([21]).

Finally, there is a strong disagreement about the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments. In Frankenthal this was "the most burning issue that separates the two groups" (Klassen: 1968, 104). On the one hand the Anabaptists are blamed for underestimating the Old Testament, but on the other hand, they are also blamed for turning Christ into a new

¹⁶ Ursinus compares the Anabaptist Christology to the doctrine of the ancient Eutychians who held that the flesh of Christ came from the Holy Spirit and from the body of Mary. It is debated if Anabaptist views were really similar to the ancient heresies, but more contemporaries blamed them of Eutychianism and Monophysitism. (Webb: 2011, 156).

¹⁷ The introduction does not have page numbers therefore the numbers of the pdf-file are used here.

Moses (18). Dathenus claims that the patriarchs saw the power of the passion of Christ that would happen in the future by faith as something in the present (337).

The Anabaptists did not acknowledge the authority of the Old Testament in Christian life and doctrine wholeheartedly. According to the recapitulation, the Anabaptists teach that “the Old Testament does not prove anything regarding the Christian doctrine and life” (771) But if only the New Testament counts, God would not be steadfast. The position of the Anabaptists implies that the Spirit of Christ has only spoken through Christ and the apostles and not through the prophets. This opens the door for all heresies and errors.

Because of this different hermeneutical approach it is possible that the phrasing regarding the gospel in the Old Testament in the catechism not only expresses polemics with the Lutherans, but also with the Anabaptists. ‘God began to reveal the gospel already in Paradise; later God proclaimed it by the holy patriarchs and prophets and foreshadowed it by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law; and finally God fulfilled it through his own beloved Son’ (*HC* 19).

Analysis and Conclusion

The implicit polemics against the Anabaptists in the Heidelberg Catechism can only be found by studying the theological positions held by or ascribed to the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. The main hermeneutical issue was as the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments and the main theological difference was on Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity. This is important to understand the sharp tone against the Anabaptists, who not only had a different view regarding one of the sacraments, but, according to the Reformed, also placed themselves doctrinally outside of the catholic church of all ages.

In the topics shortly discussed above from Ursinus’ *Commentary* and from the Frankenthal *Protocoll* – the nature of sin, the resurrection of the body, the Sabbath, the doctrines of the Trinity and of Christ, ecclesiology, and the relationship of the Old and New Testaments – some relationship with the phrasing of the *Heidelberg Catechism* is probable or at least possible, although specific influence is difficult to prove. At least the discussions on these topics show that the some knowledge of the Anabaptist convictions is important to understand the contemporary background of the text of the catechism.

In all the topics mentioned above the Anabaptists reveal a certain dualism. In their Christology they separate the divine Christ from the real human flesh, in their perfectionism they separate the saving work of the Spirit from fallen human nature, in their ecclesiology they separate the church from the world, and hermeneutically they separate the New

Testament from the Old. In these cases the Reformed had a different spirituality. They reject Anabaptist dualism between the divine and human natures of Christ, between the present flesh and the eschatological body, between the church and the world, between sinful human nature and the grace of the Spirit, and of course between the Old and New Testaments.

The spirituality of the *Heidelberg Catechism* can be characterized as a spiritualism of continuity between creation and recreation, between 'Paradise Lost' and 'Paradise Regained'. Over against the restitution of the church it advocates its reformation and instead of a new creation it expects the redemption of the fallen world from the power of sin and death.

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